

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 29, 2006

BIG SUR COASTAL TRAIL MASTER PLAN

File No. 06-007-01

Project Manager: Trish Chapman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorize acceptance of \$75,000 from the Federal Highway Administration and disbursement of up to \$175,000 for preparation of a master plan for the Coastal Trail in Big Sur, Monterey County.

LOCATION: Big Sur, Monterey County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: Excerpts from *Completing the Coastal Trail* report

Exhibit 3: Comment Letters

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31409 of the Public Resources Code:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes acceptance of seventy five thousand dollars (\$75,000) from the Federal Highway Administration and disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred seventy-five thousand dollars (\$175,000) for preparation of a master plan for the Coastal Trail in Big Sur, subject to the following conditions

1. Prior to disbursement of any funds for any work, the Conservancy's Executive Officer shall approve the work plan, budget and contractor for that work.
2. The project shall incorporate the Conservancy's Access Program Standards."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31409, regarding the Conservancy's mandate to assist in the development of a system of public accessways to and along the coast.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
 3. The project meets greater-than-local needs."
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project would authorize the Conservancy to accept and disburse \$75,000 from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), if approved by FHWA, and to disburse an additional \$100,000 of Conservancy funds to develop a master plan for the Coastal Trail through Big Sur.

Big Sur is one of the most spectacular parts of the California coast with its steep rocky cliffs that plunge into the ocean below. The dramatic scenery make it a high priority for development of the Coastal Trail, but the rugged topography makes building the trail especially challenging. Currently, for most of the length of the Big Sur coast, the Coastal Trail is located along the narrow shoulder of Highway 1. Walking along the highway shoulder with cars speeding by is neither safe nor pleasant. A master plan is needed to define a feasible and desirable alignment(s) for the trail through the region. Once completed, the plan will allow agencies to construct individual segments over time and ensure that these pieces will ultimately be part of a coherent regional trail.

Development of the master plan will be overseen by a Steering Committee made up of the public agencies and conservation organizations that manage land in the region, state and local transportation agencies, state and local land use agencies, and community representatives. The master plan will identify:

- Existing segments of the Coastal Trail and support facilities such as parking areas and restroom;
- Nodes of interest such as particularly scenic vistas, beaches, historical areas, trail linkages, campgrounds, commercial centers, etc;
- Opportunities such as existing public lands, abandoned roads or trails, and properties with public access easements or OTDs; and
- Constraints such as difficult canyon crossings, environmentally sensitive habitat areas, landslide areas, private property, and potential impacts to visual resources.

A critical element of the master plan development will be to identify and address the concerns of area residents and business owners about the impact of the Coastal Trail on the local community. Concerns raised in initial discussions with community residents include: impacts of trail users on neighboring landowners (e.g., noise, trash, loss of privacy); loss of housing and/or jobs through public acquisition of properties to accommodate the trail; and creation of hazardous situations through siting the trail on existing roads that are not wide enough to safely accommodate both cars and pedestrians.

Big Sur is one of the jewels of California's coast, and a safe, inviting Coastal Trail through the region would be a benefit to the millions of people who visit the region each year. The challenges are large, and it will probably take many years to complete the trail in this region. But development of the master plan is the first step towards the long-term vision for the Coastal Trail in Big Sur. Based on discussions with local agencies and community members, Coastal Conservancy staff intend to directly oversee the planning process for this project. This is appropriate given the statewide importance of the Coastal Trail through this region and the complexity and sensitivity of the issues.

Site Description: The Big Sur Coastal Trail Master Plan will address the 75-mile stretch of the coast between San Carpoforo Creek in San Luis Obispo County and the Carmel River in Monterey County (see Exhibit 1b). Due to the stunning views, this stretch of the highway has been designated an All-American Road. Big Sur is the steepest coastline in the continental United States, with rocky cliffs sometimes plunging hundreds of feet into the ocean below. The cliffs are cut by steep-sided canyons where coastal streams connect to the ocean. In certain reaches particularly in southern Big Sur, there is a wider, more gently sloped coastal terrace that provides easier access to the shoreline. Several areas along the coast are prone to landslides, and Highway 1 has been closed for months at a time as a result of past landslides.

The vast majority of visitors to Big Sur experience the coastline from behind the windshield of a car. Although there are several places along the highway where trails lead along the coastal terrace or down to the shoreline, most of these access points are not marked. The town of Big Sur is located approximately 26 miles south of Carmel. There are a few other commercial nodes along the coast offering limited option for food and lodging.

Project History: Policy makers and coastal managers have long planned for a continuous coastal trail in California. The Coastal Act of 1976 required local jurisdictions to identify an alignment for the California Coastal Trail in their Local Coastal Programs. Proposition 20, 1972, provides that "a hiking, bicycle, and equestrian trails system shall be established along or near the coast" and that "ideally the trails system should be continuous and located near the shoreline." In 2001, the California State Legislature, by way of SB 908, directed the State Coastal Conservancy to determine what was needed to complete the Coastal Trail. The ensuing report was completed in early 2003. Titled "Completing the California Coastal Trail", it was prepared by Conservancy staff with the participation of the Coastal Commission and State Parks, plus staff and volunteers from Coastwalk.

The Completing the Coastal Trail report identified most of the Coastal Trail through Big Sur as needing "substantial improvement" (Exhibit 2). In truth, for most of the length of the Big Sur coast, the Coastal Trail is currently located along the narrow shoulder of Highway 1. The report also identified several specific objectives along the Big Sur coast including: 1) encourage Caltrans to improve pedestrian and cycling safety along State Highway 1 in Big Sur; 2) provide a public trail connection from Andrew Molera State Park across Deer Ridge to Pfeiffer Beach; 3) assist State Parks to reestablish the Coastal Trail through Garrapata State Park; and 4) encourage the U. S. Forest Service to develop a trail through the forest and along the seaward slope between State Highway 1 and the Coast Ridge Trail.

For the past several months, a group of local residents and business owners have been meeting regularly with staff of public agencies and conservation land trusts to discuss the community's vision for Big Sur and areas of common interest or potential conflict with public agency and

conservation priorities for the region. Development of the Coastal Trail has been discussed at several of these meetings, and a recommendation was made that a plan for the Coastal Trail through the region be developed with community participation to ensure that local concerns are addressed.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
Federal Highway Administration (requested)	<u>75,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$175,000

The intended source of Conservancy funds is monies appropriated to the Conservancy from Proposition 40, the “California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002.” Proposition 40 funding may be used for any purposes consistent with the provisions of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. As discussed below, preparation of the Big Sur Coastal Trail Master Plan is entirely consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21.

The Conservancy has also applied for a \$75,000 grant from FHWA’s Scenic By-ways program. Projects approved for funding should be announced in July.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31409, System of Public Accessways.

Section 31400 states that it is “intent of the Legislature that the State Coastal Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline...” Consistent with this section, the Conservancy would take the lead role in developing a plan for the Coastal Trail through the Big Sur region.

Consistent with Section 31401, the Big Sur Coastal Trail Master Plan will develop guidelines for state, local and federal agencies to follow in acquiring land for or developing segments of the Coastal Trail through Big Sur.

Consistent with Section 31408(a), the California Department of Parks and Recreation and the California Coastal Commission will be invited to participate on the Steering Committee that will oversee development of the master plan.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective C** of the Conservancy’s Strategic Plan, the proposed project would develop a plan for development of the Coastal Trail along approximately 75 miles of the Big Sur coast. Once completed, this plan will guide the Conservancy and project partners in construction of coastal trail segments.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Development of the Coastal Trail is a cause for concern for many residents in Big Sur who fear the impacts of increased public access along the coast. Developing a master plan to guide future trail development with participation from the local community is viewed by many residents as the best way resolve the potential conflicts. The project is supported by the Big Sur Land Trust, Transportation Agency of Monterey County, and the Coastal Commission. See Exhibit 3 for support and comment letters.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Monterey County and a small portion of the coastal zone of San Luis Obispo County.
5. **Need:** Without Coastal Conservancy funding and staff support, the master plan would not be developed at this time. No other entity has both the resources and organizational commitment to development of the Coastal Trail necessary for undertaking this project.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Big Sur is a destination for travelers from throughout the state, as well as nationally and internationally. For this reason, development of the Coastal Trail through Big Sur would serve far more than local interests.

Additional Criteria

7. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
8. **Conflict resolution:** Development of the Coastal Trail is a cause for concern for many residents in Big Sur who fear the impacts of increased public access along the coast. Through the master plan process, the areas of potential conflict between the local community and visiting trail users will be identified and potential solutions will be explored. Participation by community members in the planning process will help to ensure that these potential conflicts are resolved through the trail plan.
9. **Readiness:** Conservancy staff are prepared to start this project as soon funding is secured.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
11. **Cooperation:** The master planning process would be overseen by a Steering Committee representing federal, state, and local agencies, community organizations, landowners and local residents. A cooperative planning approach is critical for the long-term success of Coastal Trail development.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Big Sur Coast Land Use Plan, the Local Coastal Program (LCP) for this portion of Monterey County. Section 6.1.2 on public access trails states that “a continuous trail system in a north-south direction would offer a unique recreational experience for both the coastal visitor and resident.” It also states that “there is an overall need to improve the coastal trail system, including increased trail access to the National Forest...” The master plan will incorporate the policies for trail development outlined in the LCP. The key policies which apply include:

- 6.1.4.3 Access should be discouraged as inappropriate where it would be inconsistent with public safety, military security or the protection of fragile coastal resources. The County and other public agencies should cooperate with landowners to develop effective methods to direct access to appropriate locations.
- 6.1.4.6 Trails should be located in areas able to sustain public use without damage to natural resources or other conflicts. Therefore, new and existing trails should be sited or rerouted to avoid safety hazards, sensitive habitats, and incompatible land uses.
- 6.1.4.7 The provision of new access or formalization of existing access is to be guided by detailed management plans, including implementation responsibilities. These should include community ideas and desires to guarantee quality land preservation, be consistent with Coastal Act policies, and must attempt to positively resolve access conflicts with residential land uses. It is the County’s policy to work closely with local citizen advisors and public agencies in planning for access and management.
- 6.1.4.9 In providing for access, the County seeks to ensure that the rights of residents and property owners, including their peace, privacy, safety, health, and property are not jeopardized by unmanaged, inappropriate (as defined in Policy 6.1.4.3), or irresponsible public access.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Preparation of the master plan will only involve planning studies and is therefore statutorily exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act, pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262. Consistent with that section, the master plan will consider environmental factors. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.